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The New York Times

Dialogues on the Arts

The Altes Museum in Berlin. The organization that oversees the museum is training Syrian refugees to be museum guides, and not just for Islamic art. CreditHermes Images/UIG, via Getty Images

The third annual Art for Tomorrow conference hosted by The New York Times in association with Qatar Museums from March 10 to 13, in Doha, Qatar, explored the relationship between art and public life. Participants, from 30 countries, included museum directors, gallery owners, curators, auction houses, collectors, entrepreneurs, investors, financial institutions, lawyers, artists, architects, urban planners and government officials, as well as corporate and civic leaders.
Following are excerpts from some of the panels as transcribed by Red Pencil Editing and Transcription. They have been edited.

Opening remarks by Farah Nayeri, a culture writer for The New York Times, who moderated a panel on museums and national identity:

Museums used to be fusty old places where countries used to stash the artworks that they had accumulated over the centuries. Today they are, as we know, so much more than that. Since the opening of the Guggenheim in Bilbao, Spain, they have taken on a host of other roles. Museums have become repositories of a country's pride and symbols of a country's identity. Now, for cities and countries to feel good about themselves, museums are constantly being built, rebuilt or radically revamped. And as in the case of Bilbao, they sometimes have also taken on the almost impossible duty of regenerating areas that have fallen into economic oblivion.

Dr. Hermann Parzinger, president of the Prussian Cultural Heritage Foundation, which oversees all museums in Germany, including five on Museum Island in Berlin, which are being renovated:

Respect for other cultures can only be learned when you see how cultures developed, how they inter-tangled, how they influenced each other. We have Syrian refugees we are training for museum guides — not only in the Museum of Islamic Art but also in a museum for Christian art. And they are fascinated understanding Christian art. And my dream is a Syrian refugee a few years living in Germany explaining a Christian sculpture to a Berliner. Our society becomes more and more complex and multiethnic, multicultural, multireligious, it's important really to explain to each other what we are and where we come from. This political issue is, I think, the most important task for a museum.

Pedro Gadanho, artistic director of the Museum of Art, Architecture and Technology in Lisbon:

We always have seen artists having a political role by either participating in demonstrations from the ’60s onward but sometimes separating their art from the political aspects, or political participation. But I think when we speak about creating exhibitions that have a certain meaning, that carry a certain message, there we have the possibility to interpret works of art that were not even strictly considered as political objects to play on a new interpretation, and to project a new discourse, to make people think in different ways.

And I think that’s again a role that the museum can have as they become also more popular and drag audiences that were not there earlier. I must say that in Portugal what I feel with the opening of the museum in October, and the fact that in a city that has 500,000 inhabitants we had 150,000 visitors from October until December. And so this meant that there was a new kind of audience coming to the museum.

The Museum of Art, Architecture and Technology in Lisbon opened in October and drew 150,000 visitors in its first three months. CreditHoracio Villalobos/Corbis, via Getty Images

The artist Christo, with the moderator Roger Cohen, on his installation “The Floating Piers,” in Italy in 2016. Built on Lake Iseo, the piers connected the mainland with large and small islands on the lake and created the feeling of walking on water. It attracted nearly 1.2 million visitors, twice as manyas expected.

Q. What do you think explains that extraordinary popularity?

A. I think we are all humans, and we are all unique. And unfortunately today with all the electronic images, we try to look the same. But actually we’re all unique.

And when we did this project, the people knew it was something that was going to happen once in a lifetime. They know in advance that it was something unique — it never happened before. They come to witness something beyond what you see all the time with electronic images, media, everything. You like to witness, to feel it. But at the very bottom, all our projects, they’re physical.

And I love the physicality. I love the wind, I love the heat, I love the water, I love all these physical things. I love to touch. And this is the very important three-dimensional work of art, that physical relationship.

Chris Michaels, head of digital and publishing at the British Museum, at the Future Museum discussion:

In an ever more globalizing age, the ability to carry our message to a global audience is an incredibly important one, and that requires investment both of time, skill and of money. But we also have a responsibility to try and drive income streams on behalf of our museums. It’s no mistake that digital is a way of making money for museums. Thirty, 40, 50 percent of all the sales transactions we will make now are from e-commerce. And that doesn’t just happen by magic, it happens by method.

The British Museum is only 30 or 40 percent funded by the government. If we want to continue to serve our audience, we have to find ways to bring that money in. And sales and selling things, in a very simplistic way, is the only way often you can do that. The British Museum rubber duck is one of the great items of merchandise in the world. You can have a Viking rubber duck, you can have an Egyptian pharaoh rubber duck.


Cyril Kongo in his studio outside Paris. CreditDmitry Kostyukov for The New York Times

Yannis Behrakis, a Pulitzer-winning Reuters photographer born and based in Greece, interviewed by Yorgos Archimandritis, author, cultural radio producer and journalist:

Q. We will start with a photo. This is one of the most famous photos of Yannis's that was on the front page of The New York Times some months ago. A photo that is tragic in its beauty, I think. What's the story?

A. I think it's on 11th or 12th of August 2015. It's on the coast of Kos, one of the islands where refugees and migrants used to come. It's a beautiful typical summer morning in Greece, and this raft is coming from Turkey, and it runs out of petrol or something. So I called the Coast Guard to come and help. It was drifting. And I took some pictures with a long lens. And it was a good feeling because the weather was good and they didn't seem that they are in immediate danger. And finally the Coast Guard came, helped them. They came out and, you know, we were doing high-fives and selfies on the beach. So it was a tragic moment, but with a beautiful outcome.

Q. Are these two notions compatible: tragedy and beauty?

A. Yeah, you know, Spinoza said hope and fear come together. And I've seen this. I've photographed this for many years, because I'm doing refugees. And refugees is one of the most important — excuse my expression — "products" of war. So this is one of my main things. And I've been dealing with refugees. I have refugee blood. My grandmother came from Turkey. She was an ethnic Greek who came in 1922. And she was helped by the French Navy. So, you know, I have refugee blood, and I feel for them. And in this case it became a personal project in the sense that these people were coming to my country.

Daniel Tobin, a founder of Urban Art Projects; Idris Khan, a London-based artist, who created a memorial sculpture in Abu Dhabi; and Cyril Kongo, a Paris-based street artist, participating in the Art in the Cityscape panel.

Mr. Tobin: I think the public space is one of the most contested spaces an artist can work. And whether they commissioned it by a private commissioner or by a city, or they put the art there themselves in a more subversive way, I think it's just about having a dialogue with a population. The thing that gets us out of bed in the morning is how we make the public realm better, how do we make a city more livable? How do you connect with people on an emotional level, on a visceral level? What makes people remember a place they've visited? What gives people that connection that makes us human?

Mr. Khan: I think artists have, especially in my occasion in Abu Dhabi, an incredible responsibility to create something for a country. It's a memorial for the soldiers who lost their lives, mainly in Yemen. And I felt a terrific responsibility to give a piece of art to the country that would trigger an emotion when people saw it. And even if people don't understand the actual structure itself, my responsibility was to create a place of reflection for everyone, for someone to sort of feel that sense of loss.

Mr. Kongo: I don't need money. I start with nothing. I'm a political refugee. I arrived in France with a fake ID, and now I'm Kongo. It's not about money. It's about expressing myself. It's about expressing the culture. It's about art. It's about humanity. The real luxury is to get your choice, to take your time in what you like.